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Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia

DOMINIQUE-SILA KHAN

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Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia

DOMINIQUE-SILA KHAN

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of religion, they cause the saint himself and his shrine to change their religious identity.

This detail brings us back to the appropriation of Nizari Ismaili pirs by some prestigious *silsila*s, a phenomenon which has failed to attract the attention of most scholars. Even now, many a Sunni devotee of Hasan Darya or Haji Sadar Shah, believing them to be pious dervishes of the Suhrawardi *ṭarīqa*, do not suspect that they were, historically, Ismaili preachers.[24] According to an Ismaili tradition, Lal Shahbaz of Sehwan, who is now generally recognised as a Suhrawardi saint, was a Nizari *dāʿī* who hid himself in the garb of a Qalandar. This saint is indeed endowed with the 'dual' personality that is a typical characteristic of the Ismaili pirs in the Subcontinent.

Before going further, another essential fact related to the process by which religious identities were shaped and shifted in South Asia should be underlined. It must be recalled that before 1866 – the date of the famous Aga Khan court case in Bombay to which we will refer at the end of this chapter – there was no distinctive official Nizari Ismaili identity as such in South Asia. The communities which had been converted by the pirs who came from Iran and established their centre in Ucch-Multan, appeared, as Nanji has suggested, as isolated pockets of followers, belonging to particular castes, professional corporations and/or specific sects. Even the term *satpanth* (which sounds like a self-appraisal rather than the name of a sect) was not extensively used. In the same way that the Ismaili pirs, and the missionaries working under their guidance, never showed themselves openly for what they were, but lived in the guise of yogis, sadhus, Sufis of various *ṭarīqa*s, Qalandars, etc., the Ismailis concealed themselves under labels such as Satpanthis or Piranapanthis, Khojas, Shamsis, Guptis, Maulais and, as my personal research has shown, Prahladpanthis, Aipanthis, Jasnathis, Nizarpanthis, Barmatis, Mahamargis, Lalbegis, Laldasis, and so on. It seems also that communities such as the Julahas and Khatris had been disciples of the Ismaili Pir Shams.[25] This tactic, which was meant to enable survival in a hostile environment, has been so efficient that not only during the colonial period, but even in modern times, some writers have perceived these various groups as following distinct religious movements.[26]

Aziz Esmail has shown in his *Poetics of Religious Experience* that a careful study of historical Islam reveals the great variety of traditions of

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he is said to have lived and preached. However, it is the place where he died which gives us a clue. One author at least has shown some curiosity about this place which he describes in his work on Kabir: 'In early days it is said there was only one shrine, which both Hindus and Muhammadans visited, and a *melā* was held which lasted over a month. Later on a friction arose.'[31]

At present, the most interesting feature at Maghar is a high wall dividing the sacred place on the bank of the river Ami into two portions: a darga which is taken care of by a family of Muslim Julahas who regard him as a pir, and a *samādhi* where the service is performed by a sadhu of the Kabir *panth*. Keay surmises that this original shrine was of the Sufi type, while the Hindu one was built later. Whether this is true or not, the striking fact is that both sacred structures look very much alike and both enshrine, among others, the tomb where the saint is said to be buried. Even according to the so-called Hindu tradition, the saint has not been cremated, and nowhere in the *samādhi* complex is there any idol, since image worship is strictly prohibited in the Kabir *panth*. A careful study of the sect shows that Islamic elements can still be traced, although they are closer to the Shi'i Ismaili tradition rather than to the Sunni Sufi one. To give but one example, a particular sadhu of the Chhattisgarh branch of the *panth* is simultaneously called Pramodh Nam and Bala Pir. In fact, a good part of the doctrinal and ritual structure of the Kabir *panth* seems to be modelled on the South-Asian Nizari Ismaili *satpanth*. Even the custom of giving one-tenth of one's earnings (*dasondh*) to the guru is still prevalent in the sect.[32] The typically Shi'i Ismaili source of authority vested in the figure of the Imam, has been shifted to the guru/pir, that is to say, to Kabir himself, who is viewed – again in the characteristic Satpanthi way – as the divine avatar of the Kali Yuga preceded by other avatars in previous cosmic eras.

It is probable that this connection between Kabir and the Ismailis, if it is not illusory, could be traced through a systematic study of the oral tradition of the Julahas of northern India, the cotton-weavers caste among whom Kabir was born. Our preliminary enquiries in Rajasthan have shown that even when the Muslim weavers belonging to this caste regard themselves as Sunnis or Twelver Shi'a, they claim to have Pir Shams as their original *murshid*, and account for their conversion to Islam by the same miracle which is ascribed to the Ismaili saint in the

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poet Rajjab, who was regarded as a Muslim. From the seventeenth century onward, one can trace the progress of Sanskritisation in Dadu's tradition. For example the seventeenth-century Hindu saint Gopaldas denies Dadu's Muslim origin, claiming that like Kabir, he was in reality the son of a Brahmin. Higher castes have gradually been attracted into the orbit of the Dadu *panth*, which at present appears outwardly as a 'full-fledged' Hindu tradition, without having lost some of its original characteristics. Although Dadu is considered to be an incarnation of Brahma, image worship is prohibited and his main temple at Naraina (traditionally referred to as *dādūdvārā*) enshrines only a book, the *Dadu Vāṇīs*, supposed to be the saint's mystical compositions. Regarding the guru and pir as an avatar of Brahma was one of the typical Ismaili Satpanthi Nizari patterns; on the other hand, the Dadupanthi shrine strongly recalls the Sikh *gurudvārā* where the *Adi Granth* (another name for the *Guru Granth* above) a collection of hymns, is the only object of worship.[37]

The controversy surrounding Nanak's personality and the nature of his *panth*, is also revealing. Following some hagiographic accounts, Rizvi suggests that he was often seen in the garb of a Sufi, and that in particular, as for Kabir, he could well appear as a *malāmatī*, although the author after a few bold assertions of this type, concludes that the founder of the Sikh *panth* was not necessarily inspired by Sufism.[38] Writers from the British colonial period do not agree on his identity. Hughes wrote that Trump, the first translator of the *Adi Granth*, thought Nanak a full-fledged Hindu, owing nothing to Islamic ideas, while he himself, in his *Dictionary of Islam*,[39] suggests, albeit hesitantly, that Sikhism could be viewed as a Muhammedan sect which, although close to Sufism, was heterodox from a strictly Sunni point of view.

The execution of Arjun, the fifth guru of the Sikhs, by Jahangir in 1606 is said to have been motivated by political factors. That may be true, insofar as politics and religion have always been closely linked, but the satisfaction expressed by Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, who claims that it was a great victory for Islam, does probably mean something else. It was not as Hindus that the Sikhs were persecuted (in which case all Hindu religious leaders would have been condemned in the same ruthless way), but as Muslim 'heretics' from the Mujaddid's 'orthodox' point of view. Later wars fought with the Sikhs in the eighteenth century had the same motivations, both political and religious, in the

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History of ex-Satpanthis - KKP

ceremony, they eventually succeeded in outnumbering the Aryas, creating a different form of 'unified' Hinduism characterised by the cult of the great Brahmanical gods; they widely patronised the construction of temples where worship was performed with the help of Brahmin ritual specialists.

We will see that the bitter rivalry which opposed the Aryas and the Sanatanis in various parts of the Subcontinent was reflected in Gujarat when both reforming organisations sought to 'reconvert' the Kanbis or Patidars who had become the disciples of the Ismaili preacher Sayyid Imam Shah.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, a new chapter in the history of South-Asian religious communities started with the arrival of Aga Khan I, Hasan 'Ali Shah (1817–1881), in India. As a result of a series of controversies, disputes and court cases, the Nizari Ismailis of the Subcontinent gradually emerged as a distinct group. As has been said earlier, until their identity came to be defined and their original tradition disclosed, the various Nizari groups concealed themselves as separate castes or sects, bearing different names. The origin and nature of their religion had remained unknown to outsiders who were not aware of the historical and religious links existing between scattered communities referred to as Khojas, Shamsis, Maulais, Momins, Imamshahis, Athias, Nizarpanthis, Barmatis, Prahladpanthis (Bishnois), Jasnathis, Aipanthis, and so forth. In the course of time, as has been shown by various scholars, groups or sections of them had come closer to Sunni or Twelver Shi'i Islam or to Hindu traditions.[95] While the Aga Khan was seeking to gather and unify these scattered communities, a party of Khojas known as the Barbhais refused to acknowledge his spiritual authority and argued that they were Sunni, like their pir, Sadr al-Din. We know that the diverse identities assumed by the Nizaris had their origin in the Shi'a practice sanctioned by the Qur'an of *taqiyya*, the precautionary concealment of beliefs. This long practice of *taqiyya* had surprising consequences: firstly, as has been already said, the absence of a clear group identity and secondly, the gradual identification of segments of the scattered Nizari communities with other religious groups. In October 1861 the Aga Khan took a historic decision. He published a paper in which he invited the Khojas to abandon *taqiyya*, which had become redundant with the advent of British power, and to acknowledge their identity as Shi'i Imami Ismailis. The famous Aga

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Khan Case of Bombay which followed in 1866 was a major event. The rigorous definition of what constituted a Khoja, given by Judge Arnould in support of the Imam's claims, induced some of them to secede and become either full-fledged Sunnis, Twelver Shi'a or to leave Islam altogether. Although this phenomenon was initially restricted to the Khoja communities, the criteria of membership were gradually extended to Shamsis, Maulais and others, with similar consequences.

Efforts to integrate the Imamshahis who, in fact, shared the same history and development as the Nizaris, even if they had evolved in a somewhat different direction,[96] were only partly successful. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was considerable controversy between the followers of the pir or *sajjāda-nishīn* of Pirana and those who had accepted the Aga Khan as their Imam. For instance, displeased with the changes that had been made at Pirana (mainly aimed at giving a more distinct identity to the Imamshahis, separating them from the mainstream Khojas and bringing them closer to the Hindus), a few Imamshahis of Bhavnagar belonging the Kachia caste decided to join the Nizari Khojas and accept the Aga Khan as Imam.[97] There was sharp controversy over their decision. Actually, at that time, following the Aga Khan or retaining one's allegiance to the religious leaders of Pirana was as much a question of doctrine as of authority. For the Khojas who accepted him as such, the Aga Khan was the Imam of the time, whereas the 'Piranapanthis' (Imamshahis), for whom the line of Imams had been interrupted, recognised various pirs, waiting for the arrival of the Imam Qa'im at the end of time. At first, the 'dissident' Imamshahis of Bhavnagar remained fully integrated in the Khoja *jamāt*, but later on, due to the pressure of their Imamshahi caste-fellows who did not recognise the same Imam, they had to form separate Gupti *jamāts* who owed allegiance to the Aga Khan. This phenomenon points to the persistence of caste identity which, for some groups, tends to remain stronger than religious affiliation.

The case of the Sayyids of Pirana, who also were persuaded by some Khoja devotees to join them, was probably different. Like other Nizari groups, they too had been concealing their Ismaili affiliation under the Sunni or Twelver Shi'a guise – a fact which may have enabled them to come closer to the Islamised *jamāts*. Actually, the integration into the Khoja *jamāt* of Imamshahi Sayyids, Guptis, whether Shamsis or Imamshahis, and of newly converted members has been a long and

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the Imamshahis, Matias or Momins (indigenous communities converted by Imamshah and his successors in Gujarat) had been portrayed by Dayaram (1777–1852), a Gujarati poet, in this picturesque way:

> The Momin swings in the middle,
> He is neither Hindu nor Turk.[99]

This situation did not fail to attract the attention of the leaders of the Arya Samaj who soon began to spread their ideas among the Momins. It is difficult to evaluate the exact number of those who joined the ranks of Dayanand Rishi's movement, but they may have been as many as the Gupti Khojas and Shamsis. Once they had joined the Arya Samaj, a few of them engaged in a campaign against the appeal of Aga Khan III, Sultan Muhammad Shah (1885–1957), to their caste-fellows. Curiously, one of them, Radhakrishnan, even joined forces with E.D. Kaba, a former Khoja, who had chosen to identify himself with the Sunni community. This alliance of two parties claiming to represent opposite, rival and even hostile traditions, is highly significant for the understanding of the issue connected with religious identities. In a sense, it is the first attempt to force the Khoja community into adhering to one of the major blocs which were emerging at that time.[100]

Narayan Ramji Limbani #History

The life story of Narayan Ram Limbani 'Contractor' and of his companions exemplifies, as does the tragic fate of the Meos during Partition, the myriad personal dramas associated with the historical 'crossing of the threshold'. A Satpanthi Patidar of Kutch following the Imamshahi tradition in the Gupti style, Limbani went to Bombay in search of employment and came into professional contact with members of the upper castes. As a result of this encounter and of the curiosity aroused by the little that was known of his beliefs and practices, the young Contractor experienced an intense feeling of shame when his companions persuaded him that the *satpanth* was a 'debased' form of religion. Although, as a Gupti, he appeared to be a member of the Hindu community, his tradition was full of Muslim elements which the outsiders could by no means understand. Eventually, Contractor left the Imamshahi community to become a staunch Arya Samajist and devoted his life to 'reconverting' his caste-fellows to 'Hinduism'. His case is very much like that of E.D. Kaba, the Pirana Khoja who, after having embraced Twelver Shi'i Islam, denounced his former coreligionists.[101] Contractor, with the same sharp criticism, claimed to disclose in his

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main work entitled *Pīrānā Satpanthī nī pol*, as indicated by the title, 'The Real Secret of the Pirana Sect'. Adopting the point of view of a high-caste Hindu, he used the adjectives *ardhdagdh* (hybrid), *kabristānī* (funerary, an allusion to the practice of burial), and *kichḍiā* (hotch-potch) to describe his former *panth*. These words, one cannot fail to notice, echo those used by the British census reports and gazetteers to describe liminal communities.

However, in Gujarat also, the Arya Samaj lost ground, as it was opposed by the Sanatanis who defended a more 'orthodox' or rather 'Brahmanical' ideal. This contributed to an acceleration in the process of 're-Hinduisation' of those Imamshahi communities, as one of Contractor's companions, Ratan Si, had also joined the movement. In fact the Pirana Satpanthis who followed him went one step further by starting to build temples and to use images in worship.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, it became extremely difficult to display a dual identity in the Subcontinent. Perceiving their traditions as 'degenerated forms of the Hindu religion', the reformers sought simply to eliminate them, forgetting that 'the sacred guardians of the doorway' had been, for centuries, a natural element of the native landscape.

At this stage, one should mention the interesting attempt made by the poet Ebrahim Varteji, a Khoja who had joined the Twelvers in his early years but finally chose to follow the Ismaili Imam. Varteji tried to 'revitalise' the *satpanth* and project it as a coherent system, not just as 'a mishmash of conflicting beliefs and practices'. In doing so he resorted to a typically Ismaili theory. Ismailism as the correct interpretation of Islam was the completion of previous revealed religious traditions, and in the context of South Asia, the culmination of Indian religions. By incorporating certain indigenous beliefs, the Ismaili faith sought to integrate them into the wider framework of its own doctrine by transforming some of its elements. Like some great Sufis, among whom one can quote Ibn 'Arabi, Rumi, 'Abd al-Quddus Gangohi, Bullhe Shah, and so on, the Ismailis believed in the fundamental inner unity of all religions. In conformity with this vision, a number of Khoja publications of that period and, later on, some Imamshahi books, displayed a logo in which the Sanskrit mantra *Om* could also be read backwards as *'Ali* in Arabic.[102]

But times had changed and it became more and more difficult for the

#History of Ratanshi Khimji Khetani

Om = Ali

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independent Indian state, did not have a place for liminal communities. Once again people were compelled to cross the threshold and join one of the artificially created blocs.

One additional remark must be made. Although the Bombay Public Trust Act of 1950 followed the legal definition of the term 'Hindu', it had reserved a place for charitable institutions which could not fit into any of these categories. 'A' was meant for the registration of Hindu charitable trusts (including as usual Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs), 'B' for Muslims, 'C' for Parsis, 'D' for Christians, Jews and 'others than 'A', 'B', or 'C'; the category 'E' which had been designed to accommodate 'Cosmopolitan' trusts could include 'non-religious' organisations, but also applied to 'shared' sacred places such as the Imamshahi shrines of Gujarat. This exception to the rule – which could have been a corrective – was unfortunately to prove fragile.

Although Pakistan had declared itself an Islamic state, it could not solve its legal problems more easily, as is shown by the successive attempts at defining legal and judicial rules which would apply to all its citizens. The leadership of the All-India Muslim League and early Pakistan saw politics as a secular and collective activity separate from religion which it considered a matter of private faith and ritual. Soon, however, the pressure for the establishment of a nation along purely traditional Islamic lines modified the situation. But this ideal proved extremely difficult to achieve since there was no political model of a Muslim state which could have applied to all Muslims, taking into account the difference between Sunni, Twelver Shi'i and Ismaili concepts of sharia and *fiqh*. The first steps towards unification was, once more, the definition of 'orthodoxy' within Islam, leading to the rejection of some Muslim movements which were declared 'un-Islamic'.[28] Those who wished to select a particular form of Sunnism as a standard applicable to all, forgot too easily the active role – and the substantial personal involvement, for instance within the Muslim League, of some Shi'i leaders, including the Aga Khan and Sayyid Ameer Ali – in defending the Islamic cause. In any case, it became gradually clear that no consensus could be reached, not because of sectarian disputes, but owing to the history of Islam which had, for centuries, maintained a tradition of diversity based on different interpretations of the Qur'an.

Let us conclude this section by a final remark: far from solving the issue of 'differences', Partition contributed to reinforcing them, as

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Dharma that came to replace the declining model of the Arya Samaj deeply affected the life of the Pirana Satpanthi Patidars and of many other Guptis – that is to say, of the communities who had survived for centuries under Hindu guise. Whether previously affiliated or not to the Arya Samaj, an increasing number of them abandoned the sect to embrace the 'standardised' form of religion represented by the Sanatani episteme. They were encouraged by the Hindu nationalists, in particular by the leaders of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, a religious organisation of the Sangh Parivar which sought to 'unify' the Hindu religion. Adopting the Sanatani ideals meant performing image worship and consequently building new temples where idols of gods would be installed. In a few decades, between the 1930s and the 1980s, the landscape of the Satpanthi villages of Kutch, where the Imamshahi Patidars were the most numerous, underwent a spectacular transformation. 'Regular' Hindu temples were constructed everywhere, generally near the old *khānas* meant for the traditional Satpanthi rituals. The alarming rate of these 'desertions' was a serious concern for the Imamshahi authorities of Pirana. At this stage, the *sajjādā-nishīn* who claimed to be the pir or main authority representing the hidden Imam, apparently resorted to the usual Shi'i custom of *taqiyya*. Understanding that the very existence of the Satpanth was threatened, the leader of the Gupti community, the head *kākā* or 'servant of God' according to the traditional Imamshahi terminology, who was also the *mujāvar* or custodian of the shrine in the Sufi idiom, undertook a series of Hinduising reforms. They were meant to help his disciples to remain faithful to their sect without incurring the criticism of their Sanatani caste-fellows. The Imamshahi Guptis could then assert their identity as 'orthodox' Hindus and even claim that their tradition had never been influenced by Islam. The newly built *khānas* were made to resemble classical Hindu shrines and renamed Nishkalanki *mandirs* or temples to Vishnu's tenth avatar. No regular idols were installed, as this was contrary to the basic principles of the Satpanth, although behind the ritual table (*pāṭ*) the figures of the three main gods or the *Om* symbol were painted – but, according to the Brahmanical tradition, these could not be regarded as 'orthodox' idols, images meant for the cult being always tri-dimensional. Similarly the Pirana darga was to be renamed *samādhi* as the custom of burial which was reinterpreted as the *samādhi* of Shaiva ascetics. Then a number of learned Satpanthis were entrusted with the delicate task of rewriting

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their *ginān*s by expurgating these devotional poems of their Islamic terminology and references and replacing them with Hindu equivalents. Earlier texts, as for instance those published by the deceased father of the present pir, were banned and the rewritten book openly circulated for sales and displayed at the Pirana bookstore.[31] There is reason to believe that these reforms are being made with the purpose of protecting the Pirana tradition in the present Gujarati context where the Hindu nationalist ideal is strong. In other words, that the changes 'officially' effected within the sect are due to *taqiyya*, rather than to a conscious wish to transform the tradition into a 'purely Hindu' one.[32] However, one should try to analyse the consequences of this 'revolution' from the point of view of religious identities. The present evolution of the Pirana sect that started in the 1980s once again confirms the fact that liminal traditions can hardly survive in contemporary South Asia. On the other hand, if the recent reforms are only a temporary move dictated by *taqiyya*, one cannot doubt that new generations, as we have been able to observe for ourselves during our field research among the Imamshahi Patidars of Kutch, readily follow the new trend which re-establishes their solidarity with their Sanatani caste-fellows and allows them to feel at ease in all Hindu milieus, whilst the youngest are even totally ignorant of the existence of an older 'syncretic' tradition tinged with Islamic elements.

The evolution of the Bishnoi or Prahladpanthi community, which functions simultaneously as a sect and as a caste, is another interesting example of the phenomenon which consists in a subtle 'reinvention' of tradition. After having 'crossed the threshold' a number of the followers of this liminal movement merged into the Sunni stream,[33] while others headed towards a rapid Hinduisation. But, as they cherished the memory of their spiritual teacher, it was hard to betray it openly. The reformers attempted to side-step the issue. Traditionally, the grave of their guru, Jambhoji or Jambeshvar Pir, which is the only object of worship, was covered with a green *chādar* (as is the case of the *mazār* of Nizarpanthi and Jasnathi saints). In the 1950s the darga (also referred to as *mukām*) was renamed *mandir*, and said to enshrine the *samādhi* or tomb of a Hindu ascetic. A painting representing the founder of the *panth* was hung on the wall behind the grave. 'Mukam', which had become the name of the village where the shrine stood was construed as a corruption of the term *muktidhām* (a sacred site where *mukti* or

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liberation is obtained). The leaders of the sect found a simple solution by which they hoped to please all the Bishnois without offending the memory of the pir. The green cloth was not removed but covered by a saffron one. In this way, outsiders visiting the shrine would be convinced of its Hindu identity. The presence of the hidden *chādar* was known only to the initiated members. We will come back to this interesting phenomenon which can be viewed as a metaphor.

Let us now examine the parallel evolution of Muslim 'normative' ideals. Apart from the activities of the reformist movements, such as the Tablighi Jama'at, the social and economic uplift of a number of middle-class Muslims, who went to the Arabian/Persian Gulf countries in search of employment before returning to their native villages and towns has been another factor of transformation. Apart from the considerable improvement of their financial situation, their ideas had changed. They did not only invest their money in various ways such as building houses, opening shops and enlarging their businesses, they also constructed mosques to show that they had become 'good' Muslims, often to the dismay of their elders for whom praying at home was generally deemed sufficient. Had their sons committed so many sins that they were obliged to expiate them through such grand projects? Those who came back from the Gulf had learned to underestimate their own regional values in favour of the 'universal' Muslim culture that was exclusively identified with the Arab model. Besides, the urban milieus were increasingly imbibing the discourses of the various reformist organisations who wished to gather all of them under the banner of one single 'normative' Islam.

It will not be out of place here to examine how this changed atmosphere affected the Imamshahis who had lived for centuries in the guise of Sunni or Twelver Muslims. This had, after all, been the case of the Sayyids who claimed to be the descendants of Imam Shah. For a long time the three main lines, Jalalshahis, Sayyidkhanis and Nurshahis, had evolved separately, each claiming the right to represent the main religious authority at Imam Shah's darga. The Jalalshahis, for instance, claimed to be Sunni, although some of them admitted the historical links that existed with Shi'i Ismailism and emphasised the particular nature of the Imamshahi Satpanth which, as a synthesis of Sufi and Hindu elements, would have been created to facilitate the conversion of local non-Muslim communities. Others among the Nurshahi Sayyids

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denied any connection with the Ismailis and asserted the Suhrawardi Sufi identity of Imam Shah who, like Muhammad Shah Bukhari, was a prominent Sufi settled in fifteenth-century Gujurat and was said to have been Rukn al-Din's *murīd*. A book was written to clarify this stand and prove the Sunni connection.[34] Needless to say these Sunni Nurshahi Sayyids did not perform any of the typical Satpanthi rituals and limited themselves to occasionally visiting the tomb of their ancestor Imam Shah (particularly on the *urs*, or anniversary of his death).

Meanwhile, a group of low-caste converts, referred to as Nurshahi Momins, who had been Gupti followers of Nur Shah, one of Imam Shah's descendents, were recently approached by Twelver Shi'i leaders from Lucknow. By emphasising the Shi'i elements (which were naturally present in their sacred literature owing to its Ismaili origin), they undertook to convince them that Twelver Shi'ism had always been the form of Islam followed by Nur Shah. Denying again any historical connection with the Ismailis, they explained that the 'syncretic' elements of their tradition were simply the remnants of a former 'strategy of conversion'.[35] Consequently, the whole community assumed full Twelver identity and gave up all their Satpanthi practices and beliefs, preserving only their reverence for the pir who converted them and whose darga they also visited on special occasions. Similarly we were told that some 'Hindu' Guptis fully assumed Sunni identity under the influence of the Tablighi Jama'at. They are also referred to as Momins.

As far as the Sayyidkhanis and some other Sayyids are concerned, we will see their evolution in the concluding part of this essay.

Dress Codes and Colour Symbols: Religion Standardised

The split of liminal communities into Hindus and Muslims did not only create communal and legal conflicts. In ordinary life newly emerging, clear-cut identities came to be expressed through a number of symbols that reinforced the estrangement between communities. This phenomenon also coincides with a more general and universal tendency to 'standardise' culture through the diffusion of popular books, newspapers and magazines, as well as through cinema and television.[36]

For centuries, costume had varied mainly along caste and regional lines. In Rajasthan most women, whether Hindu or Muslim, wore the typical *ghaghrā* (a full, pleated skirt), while in Bihar, the sari was

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Khadekri, two Mer villages located near Ajmer in Rajasthan, noted that the Merat, Khatat and Cheetah clans had not ceased to share most customs and festivals, regardless of their present religious identity.[10] For example, a Muslim Merat named Ala al-Din regularly went both to the local mosque and to the Ramdev temple, and had given Hindu names to his children. Some of their marriages were performed simultaneously with the traditional *pherās* (fire circumambulation) and the *nikāh* ceremony. Rawats and Merats celebrated Diwali and Holi with the same enthusiasm as 'Id or Shab-e-barat. Ala al-Din explained that if the majority of Hindu and Muslim Mers used to visit both temples and mosques, after their death all of them were buried according to the Islamic rite. In one of these villages the author of the article also met a Merat woman wearing the typical Rajasthani skirt and blouse favoured by Hindus who said she did not perform her prayers regularly, but declared herself to be a staunch Muslim.[11]

It is now time to revert to the two traditions which have been chosen as the focus of this study. As we have seen, although they share a common origin, history has thrown them in different, even at times, opposite, directions.

The evolution of the Nizari Ismailis of India and Pakistan and of the Imamshahis (currently referred to as Satpanthis) settled in Gujarat and Maharashtra is too complex a phenomenon to be analysed in detail here. An attempt has been made, in previous chapters, to throw some light on these little-known traditions. A few additional remarks will suffice here. The Ismailis of Pakistan and India have shown a remarkable ability to adapt themselves to the new historical circumstances and to a changed cultural environment – a feature which is typical of most communities who have had to struggle for long periods in order to survive, but which also has something to do with the nature of the tradition itself. Many former Guptis, for instance, have responded positively to the new historical pressures, and been able to shift their identity gradually, without abandoning their specific religious traditions. Diamond Rattansi[12] has shown that among the Ismaili Khojas of Pakistan, the nature of the Ismaili doctrine itself and the role of the Imam have been instrumental in achieving, in a smooth way, the delicate 'passage through the threshold'.

On the other hand, the Imamshahi branch, having started to follow its own way, probably from the late eighteenth century onward, is now

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experiencing an unprecedented crisis of identity, owing to the fact that they do not recognise one single religious authority. Caught between Hindu and Muslim 'orthodox forces', who literally drove them away from the 'threshold' where they had been standing for centuries, the Imamshahis, followers of the Satpanth, have evolved various responses to the crisis. As noted in the previous chapter, a number of 'Hindus', in particular the Patidars who form the majority of its members, have attempted to demonstrate to the representatives of Hindutva, in particular to the VHP, that their tradition was fundamentally a Hindu one. They are now trying to modify their rituals and literature in a direction that is opposite to that of the present Ismailis.

Then why there is attack on hinduism

The leader of the Hindu-converted communities or Guptis now appears as a full-fledged Hindu *mahant* (superior), although he could, like the Nizari *dāʿī* Nasir al-Din in a famous *ginān* ascribed to Pir Hasan Kabir al-Din exclaim: '*Charitar hindū, andar musulmān*' (Outwardly Hindu, Muslim in his inner self).[13] In the previous chapter we have suggested that this may be a temporary measure of protection. Actually, many Satpanthis have remained true Guptis. They secretly continue to recite their *duʿā* (prayer) and to pay obeisance to their pir, who is himself careful not to appear in public in ordinary circumstances.[14] They may do so with the hope that better times will come. Apart from the Sayyids who have adopted a Muslim, Sunni or Twelver Shiʿi identity, a number of 'Hindu' Patidars, have organised their own resistance movement, supported by the followers of the Athia branch, a separate sect of Imamshahis who have been more successful in preserving their original traditions. In the course of this struggle, what may appear to uninformed observers as a series of communal conflicts reflected in heated religious debates and endless court cases, may well be the final outburst of a crisis that will reveal what is really at stake. In order to plead their case in front of puzzled lawyers who have been, up to now, largely used to thinking in terms of binary Hindu/Muslim categories, the protesting Imamshahis who had long denied any historical connection with the Ismaili tradition, now feel the urge to acknowledge their roots which lie in the Nizari acculturated tradition of the Subcontinent.

Myriads of other facts collected directly from the field would show that 'resistance' is a rather natural process in an artificially imposed world organised along uniform lines and simplistic dichotomies. The

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wards the Definition of a Muslim in an Islamic State: The Case of Ahmadiyya in Pakistan', in Vajpeyi and Malik, ed., *Religious and Ethnic Minority Politics in South Asia* (London and Delhi, 1989), pp.71–108.

29. Monika Horstmann, 'Towards a Universal Dharma: Kalyan and the Tracts of the Gita Press', in Dalmia and von Stietencron, ed., *Representing Hinduism*, pp.294–305.

30. The type of superficial, mass culture which was spreading did not encourage the readers of such publications to question or verify those assertions which they took for granted like all the rest. A few words should be said about the 'fashionable' new theory regarding the Aryan origin of the Harappeans, the ancient inhabitants of the Indus Valley. This theory, which does not hold ground from many points of view, including linguistics and archaeology, nonetheless enjoys huge popularity among middle-class Hindus.

The author of this article, met the persons manipulating the Satpanth books, by which muslim terms were replaced with Hindu terms

31. The task of rewriting the Ginanic literature of the Imamshahis has not been completed to this day. The author of this essay incidentally met in Kutch one of the writers entrusted with the 'amendment' of the Satpanthi sacred literature. It is interesting to note here that the Hindu terms and names meant to replace the Muslim Ismaili ones had already been used to a great extent in the Nizari tradition of South Asia – a phenomenon for which the literature, as the whole tradition, could be termed precisely 'liminal' as we have seen in the previous chapters.

32. See Khan and Moir, *Coexistence and Communalism*.

33. As my field research has shown, among those 'lost' Prahladpanthi communities which are not referred to as Bishnois, the Silawats of Roll (a village near Nagaur in Rajasthan) have come under the influence of the local Suhrawardi Sufis.

34. The author, Abuali Bapu Miya, is a Sayyid from Petlad, Gujarat. The book, published in 1933, is written in the Urdu language but transcribed in the Gujarati script.

35. This information is taken from the field inquiry we conducted at Pirana in January 2000. In view of our common project, Zawahir Moir has undertaken a detailed study of Imamshahi history based on original sources which has remained largely unexplored to this day. I thank her for helping me to clarify the complex issues related to the evolution of the various lines of Imam Shah's descendants.

36. In contemporary India, although they are supposed to be secular, the media tend to reproduce this simplistic and dualistic vision. Popular TV serials on the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* convey the same message of uniformity and mediocrity, as similar productions do for an image of oversimplified and standardised Islam in Pakistan. On this topic see Angelika Malinar, 'The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata TV serial: Domestic Drama

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